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SUBJECT: INFORMATION MINISTER SURVIVES IMPEACHMENT VOTE
OVER MEDIA LAW

REF: KABUL 913

¶1. (U) Information and Culture Minister Abdul Karim Khoram survived a chaotic impeachment vote in the Lower House on April 20 over his refusal to enforce the media law. Pashtuns and former members of the Hezb-e-Islami mujahideen group rallied to Khoram's defense, shouting down the minister's critics and orchestrating a quick impromptu vote by a show of hands. Khoram's leading critics said afterward that pro-Khoram MPs had intimidated many anti-Khoram MPs into abstaining or not attending Parliament at all. The Lower House's leadership did not record an official vote count, though green cards (pro-Khoram) outnumbered red cards (pro-impeachment) by more than a 2-1 margin. One MP said he counted 27 pro-impeachment votes) a stark contrast from the preliminary 71-52 vote in favor of impeachment held on April 18.

¶2. (U) MP Mir Ahmed Joyenda (Kabul, Hazara) organized the push for Khoram's impeachment, pointing to Khoram's refusal to enforce a media law passed over President Karzai's veto by a two-thirds Lower House majority last September (reftel). Khoram has criticized the law for being improperly influenced by Western governments and too lenient toward un-Islamic media content. A majority of MPs have supported the law, calling it an important reinforcement of the Constitution's protections for media freedoms. Karzai has objected to one provision requiring the chief of the state-run Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA) to win confirmation from the Lower House, and has refused to publish the law in the official legal gazette. Embassy, others in the international community, and civil society groups continue to press Karzai to gazette the law. Many MPs feel confirmation of the RTA chief will help ensure impartiality in state media, especially during election campaigns.

¶3. (SBU) After the vote, Joyenda told PolOff that Khoram's backers had framed the vote as an ethnic issue, claiming the minister's Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara critics wanted fewer Pashtuns like Khoram in the Cabinet. Khoram's connections to the Hezb-e-Islami mujahideen group also appeared to benefit him, as several MPs who fought against the Soviet occupation alongside Khoram rallied to his defense. Those MPs shouted over other MPs during the debate and ignored Deputy Speaker Yaseni's attempts to bring the house to order. Joyenda also blamed the Lower House's new system of voting on impeachment) raising red or green cards by hand instead of a secret ballot) for helping pro-Khoram MPs intimidate the opposition. Several Lower House staffers and Parliament watchers said Khoram's allies had called pro-impeachment MPs over the past two days and warned them not to attend Parliament or abstain from voting. Despite 123 MPs in attendance, only about 80 raised a red or green card. Attendance among women MPs was down dramatically, even though many had voted for the minister's impeachment in the non-binding April 18 vote. A UNAMA Parliament watcher commented that he had never seen so few women MPs present for a plenary session.

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